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The Impossible InSight

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Faking It. For Real

This is an attempt to tackle the question of the force of movies. To do so, I will make use of a very sideways approach, neither coming from the movies nor from film theory or film philosophy, but from a philosophical argument that has nothing to do with movies, an argument made by Immanuel Kant. In his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* Kant makes a series of surprising claims, surprising at least with regard to the image of Kant as moral rigorist. These claims present an instructive entry point for my following remarks. In paragraph 13 of the *Anthropology*, which is entitled “On artificial play with sensory illusion” Kant introduces a distinction into the realm of what he calls “delusion” (2007: 261).¹ Delusion is produced in the understanding as an effect of sense-representation. The conceptual refinement Kant now introduces is that delusion is either illusion and then it is natural or it is deception and then it is artificial. And he adds: “illusion is delusion that persists even though one knows that the supposed subject is not real” (2007: 261). Think of perceptive illusion which persists even though one knows how things really are. Or think of Spinoza’s example that even though we know, if we know a bit of physics, that the sun is not a tiny-shiny potato up in the sky, when we leave the house it is precisely as such a potato that it spontaneously appears to us. Kant himself later uses clothing as an example for this effect, clothing “whose color sets off the face to advantage” (2007: 262). In opposition to illusion that persists and seems therefore independent from knowledge, deception stops as soon as one attains knowledge about how the object of deception is constituted. Kant’s example here is makeup, which for him is not seductive like clothing, but rather gives one the feeling that one is “mocked [...]. This is why the *statues* of human beings and animals painted with natural colors are not liked: each time they unexpectedly come into sight, one is momentarily deceived into regarding them as living” (2007: 262; original emphasis).

Illusion is what persists even when one identifies illusion as illusion – deception does not survive its identification. Deception is therefore always accompanied by the

¹ Slavoj Žižek (2014) has commented on these passages.



impression of being mocked: something appears in my sight, which then turns out to be different from how I first perceived it to be. Knowledge thereby corrects a misperception that was artificially constructed. In illusion it is not knowledge and perception, but knowledge and belief that are somehow constitutively separated – one can know that something is an illusion, yet one does nonetheless not believe what one knows. This is, obviously, the famous formula of fetishist disavowal, pointedly coined by Octave Mannoni: ‘I know very well, but nevertheless...’. Deception does not follow the same structure: if you know that you have been deceived, you will immediately believe what you know. This means that for Kant illusions have an efficacy and endurance that exceeds that of deception. Their power is linked to, even derived from the splitting of knowledge and belief.

This is the diagnosis on the basis of which Kant draws some daring conclusions. The next paragraph of his *Anthropology* is entitled “On permissible moral illusion.” Therein he states:

On the whole, the more civilized human beings are, the more they are actors. They adopt the illusion of affection, of respect for others, of modesty[...] without deceiving anyone at all, because it is understood by everyone that nothing is meant sincerely by this. And it is also good that this happens in the world. For when human beings play these roles, eventually the virtues, whose illusion they have merely affected for a considerable length of time, will gradually really be aroused and merge into the disposition. But to deceive the deceiver in ourselves, the inclinations, is a return to obedience under the law of virtue and is not a deception, but rather a laudable illusion [*Täuschung*] of ourselves. (2007: 263f.)

Kant here depicts a peculiar kind of performativity at work, which is also the reason why we are here dealing with an anthropology from a *pragmatic* point of view. The performativity is peculiar because it implies a surprising kind of causality, one that almost resembles the Hegelian conception of the negation of negation. This causality is embedded, if not embodied, in polite ways of faking it; in illusionary ways of acting as if one were nice, charming, modest, tolerant, etc. Although these are just illusionary practices and although everyone knows this, they are nonetheless effective. Yet, their effectiveness does not derive from an act of deceiving others, but from deceiving the deceiver in ourselves: the inclinations, which otherwise move us away from acting in a virtuous, modest, etc. manner.

This is to say that pretending to be a nice person does not mean to deceive others. It rather implies that I generate an illusion whose effect is that I deceive the deceiver in myself. The effect of this is that my actions start to correspond to the illusion, whereby I effectively become the illusion that I have generated in my relations to others. The structure of this is the following: I know I am faking it, the others know that I am faking it and they are faking it, too. Yet, through the interplay of pretence and illusions, I start



to believe in the very illusion enacted, and I become what I pretended to be. Therefore, Kant claims in the same paragraph that “this is precisely why they [the illusions] do not *deceive*, because everyone knows how they should be taken, and especially because these signs of benevolence and respect, though empty at first, gradually lead to real dispositions of this sort” (2007: 264; original emphasis). Through (and maybe only through) empty illusions one can generate something real, a real disposition for example of a virtuous kind. The emptiness of the illusions – empty because they are not linked to true subjective commitments – functions thereby like a placeholder for virtue-to-emerge. This is also why even “the illusion of good in others must have worth for us, for out of this play of pretences [*Verstellungen*], which acquires respect without perhaps earning it, something quite serious can finally develop” (2007: 264). It is “only the illusion of good in ourselves that must be wiped out without exemption” (2007: 264). Otherwise I, for example, have the illusion that I am a good guy and I blame the objective circumstances for not allowing me to be that good guy. Kant’s own example is that at the end of one’s life someone regrets all of her wrongdoings and assumes that this is already an index for a change of character. As soon as I generate such a *self-illusion*, it ultimately proves to be nothing but a deception – self-illusion is thus fundamentally different from pretence. Since for such self-illusion holds that if I had the knowledge of how I really am, I would immediately see myself as being the (say bad) person that I am. Self-illusion is individual misperception and hence deception.

Real politeness and virtue emerge from pretence and illusions. It is linked to the force, to the power of illusion as such. Even if I and all others know that I am faking it, it is possible that through faking it I start to believe in what I faked. The structure of this can be summed up as follows: “I know very well I am pretending X, but nevertheless I start to believe in what I am pretending and hence actually become the illusion that I enacted.” The astonishing point is that Kant here neither argues for a grounding of real ethical disposition in a transcendental a priori normative framework which could orient subjective-practical action, nor does he ground the transcendental normative framework in its empirical human embodiment (this would have been what Foucault (2008) in his comments on the *Anthropology* called the empirical-transcendental double). Rather, the truly ethical dispositions are grounded in a belief, in a fully transparent illusion, which springs from a collective practice. They are grounded in an illusion which we know to be an illusion, but we nonetheless believe in it. Such an illusion is for Kant the true performative groundwork for something real to emerge. Here one can specify the precise character of the relation between the two stages of pretending and becoming one’s pretence that Kant delineates: as long as one pretends one knows that one pretends and hence one does not really believe in what one is pretending, otherwise pretending would not be pretending any longer. There is hence a separation between knowledge and belief, informed by knowledge.



When one starts believing what one is pretending, one does not know that one is not pretending anymore – a split between belief and knowledge emerges. In that moment, one believes in something, but one does not know what one is doing – simply already because one does not know that one believes something that differs from what one (believes to) know(s). First one knows what one does but does not believe in it (this is why one is faking and pretending), then one starts believing in what one just pretends and this belief does something to what we know of our own action. This is to say that I am neither simply pretending nor was I simply overwhelmed by the illusion which I previously enacted. Rather something in me, this is Kant's point, has started believing without me knowing what I am doing: I do not know that I believe in what I just pretend to do, but I believe to know that I am just pretending. My knowledge and my belief go separate, yet entangled ways. The subject of this pretending practice is split between pretension and its effects, between acting in a believable way and being what is enacted, between not knowing what one believes and believing one knows. Yet, the moment the pretension becomes real is impossible to determine and the subject will only post facto be able to register that this move has occurred.

This is to say that knowledge and belief are somehow internally separated in the sense that knowledge itself cannot coincide with itself. In the *Anthropology*, pretence is thus for Kant a necessary precondition of a real virtuous disposition, which emerges without our knowledge. First one knows that one is pretending, afterwards one believes what one was pretending, but one does not know that one believes what one knew to be fake before. So, technically one is dealing with a sort of unconscious belief. There is a strange application of this Kantian pragmatist logic that complicates the whole set-up to a certain extent, namely the well-known story of how Molière died in 1673. He played and hence pretended to be Argan, the imaginary invalid, thus someone pretending to be sick. Even though he finished the performance, he afterwards collapsed and died. In Kantian terms one may infer: even if one just pretends to pretend, this may lead to the emergence of something real. What does this have to do with cinema and with the impossible?

Effective Alienation

It is instructive here to supplement this Kantian account of the emergence of subjective normative orientation with an example Bertolt Brecht brought up when he sought to explain the defamiliarization, alienation or estrangement effect [*Verfremdungseffekt*]. To delineate the specific operation and peculiar effectiveness of it, Brecht constructed the following situation: A pedestrian walks across the sidewalk, and there seems to be nothing remarkable about this situation per se. The defamiliarization, effect operates in such a way that it creates (and thus not simply emphasizes) the otherwise invisible



oddity of this ordinary situation. It is thereby productive: “The V-effect consists in turning the object of which we are made to be aware, to which our attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected” (Brecht 2014: 192). This effect occurs when a pedestrian is imitated. When an actor repeats the walk and literally mimics the unexciting ordinary situation, something happens. The task of the actor is to over-emphasize and exaggerate in his imitation the characteristics of the style in which the pedestrian walks. Brecht claims if the actor performs the task adequately an audience watching the scene will start to laugh. This does not happen because the imitation is so amusing or because one witnesses a caricature of the individual style in which the pedestrian walks.²

Instead, this scene produces laughter through and only through the mimetic practice of imitation, through the redoubling of something that previously seemed ordinary and unremarkable. Why? Because it brings out something un-natural and artificial in the boringly ordinary. Repeating what is boring renders it funny. However, the alienation effect does not simply aim at unraveling the artificiality, even of boring everyday situations. Rather it produces something, something else. With the alienation effect we are not dealing with a simple form of mimesis. We are not encountering here a mere copy of reality (if anyone had ever actually believed this to be mimesis anyhow), even though we are obviously dealing with a mimetic practice. But the mimesis operates here through an exaggerated form of imitation: something appears which only comes to the fore because the ordinary situation is supplemented with an additional copy of itself. This copy makes appear what did not exist before the repetition, namely the artificiality that was invisible in the first place. The defamiliarization effect uses repetition productively: through it there is a *retroactive transformation* of what existed before. The pedestrian style will have been a different one after its imitation, namely it will appear as if it was already amusing prior to its imitation (which it was not). Through redoubling, the defamiliarization effect creates a retroactive transformation that generates a *retroactive surplus*.

The exaggerated mimesis produces a retroactive transformation of the past³ by inscribing a minimal difference, a minimal deviation into the previous situation (i.e. into the walking style of the pedestrian). This is not to say that this is what happens as soon as we have a relation between an original and a copy. The peculiar effect Brecht depicts rather occurs when through imitative repetition the style of the pedestrian stands *to itself* in a peculiar relation of minimal difference. The walk of the pedestrian thereby

² For this cf. the writings on the “V-effect” in Brecht 2014: 184ff.

³ Think of how, say Kafka, as was once claimed, created his own predecessors. After Kafka one sees something of Kafka in Dante, etc. So the emergence of any novelty is a transformation not that much of the future but of the past through the creation of a new present (i.e. the point of view from which the past taken a new guise).



becomes ultimately the unity of what it was before the imitation and that which it will have been after its imitation. It is the identity of prior identity and difference introduced through repetition where the minimal difference lies. Repetition, the peculiar act of redoubling Brecht describes, does not produce a peculiar minimal difference by adding new determinations or an external supplement to the style in which the pedestrian walks. Rather it replaces the previous determination with an immanent split, with an minimally deviant determination. This results “from a repetition of a practice that is itself no practice any more” (Menke 2013: 54; my translation) – from an empty act of a repetition – walking like someone else is conceptually not walking (say from A to B), but mimicking someone who walks. It generates something which did previously not exist, a minimal difference in what is. Repetition in this sense creates not only difference, but makes appear what was inexistent before.

Remember: Remember

Let me now turn, abruptly, to a movie. To a very strange movie, because it is one that has never been made: in the 1960s, Pier Paolo Pasolini planned to realize a rather unusual project that he was never able to carry out (at least not in the form of a film). He was working on a screenplay about the life of Saint Paul. The film was intended “to transpose the entire affair of Saint Paul to our own time” (Pasolini 2013: 17). To realize this project, Pasolini planned not at all to “alter the word of Saint Paul”, he rather tried “to summarize the entire arc of his apostolate” (2014:1). Why try and transplant Paul and his teaching into the contemporary world? Pasolini answers by stating that he tried “to present, cinematographically, in the most direct and violent fashion, the impression and his reality / present” (2014: 32). Alain Badiou commented on Pasolini’s project, remarking the latter sought “to turn Paul into a contemporary without any modification of his statements” (2003: 37). One is thus here dealing with an attempt of cinematographic repetition. The aim of this repetition was to “say then explicitly to the spectator, without compelling him to think that ‘Saint Paul is *here, today, among us*’” (Pasolini 2014: 32; original emphasis) – he is here with and among us, as much as for Hegel, in one of his famous sayings, the absolute is with us (cf. Hegel 1977: 47).

Badiou claimed that the aim of transplanting Paul into the contemporary world was linked to a threefold diagnosis: 1. For Pasolini “today the figure of the saint is necessary, even if the contents of the initiating encounter may vary”; 2. “by transplanting Paul, along with all his statements [...] one sees [him and] them encountering a real society [...], [one] infinitely more supple and resistant than that of the Roman Empire”; and 3) “Paul’s statements are [thereby] endowed with a timeless legitimacy” (2003: 37) – his “typical language [...] is universal and eternal, but not-actual [...]” (Pasolini 2013: 19). This timeless legitimacy cannot simply emerge in a different time than Paul’s own



without entering into what Pasolini called a “long series of transpositions” (2014: 33). For him this meant that “the world in which Saint Paul lives and acts in our movie is that of 1966 and 1967.” This implies for example that

the seat of modern power over the rest of the earth – is not any longer, today, Rome. And if it isn’t Rome, what is it? [...] New York, along with Washington [...]. [T]he cultural, ideological, civil, in its own way religious center [...] is no longer Jerusalem but Paris [...]. And Antioch could probably be replaced, by analogy, by London (insofar as it is the capital of an imperial, antecedent of American supremacy [...]). (Pasolini 2014: 33)

All these transpositions are necessary for a proper repetition of Paul’s initial way of acting (and walking) within the frame of the contemporary world. They are exaggerations or, at least, radicalizing transpositions needed to produce his contemporaneity by repeating his gesture. They are necessary additions to demonstrate that Paul’s conviction is still with us, without any additions. If Paul is among us, we only and literally see his contemporaneity when his commitment is visibly repeated in our world. Paul is with us, yet to make this intelligible one needs the repetition of Paul – Pasolini’s movie was supposed to perform this very repetition. Through this repetition – as with Brecht – the world as it is becomes something other than it was prior to this repetition: after this repetition it will have been a world in which there is the world and there is Paul’s untimely, contemporarily efficacious message.

Pasolini’s repetition of Paul thus implies an affirmation of the very possibility of something like a Paulinian commitment and subjective position – the belief in the resurrection – in a world that seems to be radically different from Paul’s and wherein such position seems impossible. One is here dealing with a repetition that produces a surplus (it adds something to the world as it is), and this surplus is produced by affirming something which does not appear in the world as is. This repetition is clearly located within the frame of the world of the 1960s in its historical specificity. But it also generates an index of something else within this very world. Again an act of repetition is productive of a minimal difference in what is, even though here in and of a different kind. There is the world and that which within it is supposed to be and there is that which does not exist within it. Through repeating Paul, Pasolini indicates that that which is not can nonetheless be determinately affirmed. Pasolini’s never-shot movie aimed to screen that which stands in a relation of exception to the contemporary world. For Pasolini there is only the world as it is, except that there is Paul. There is only New York, Washington, Paris, and London, except that there is Paul.⁴ Through repeating Paul’s gesture, the movie stages a determinate affirmation, an affirmation of the very possibility of an exception. An exception that, if affirmed, introduces a minimal

⁴ It is important that Pasolini with this clearly follows the imperative that “a credible progressive art [...] must be an art of its time” (Badiou 2013a: 46).



difference between the world as it is, since it brings out that which seemingly does not exist in it. The world thus becomes the identity of the identity and difference, the unity of what it was prior to the act of repetition and that which it will have been afterwards. This affirmation of an exception through repetition also serves as a reminder. It recalls something, something that needs to be remembered, as it does not seem to exist anymore. Pasolini's inexistent movie is thus in this sense anamnestic.

What does it recall? Clearly, not something that can be known. Rather it recalls something directly related to the conviction of Paul. It repeats, affirms and thereby recalls the possibility of an allegedly impossible subjective stance, an orientation beyond what appears to be given, an orientation that does not follow the order of the world as it is. Which is why it does not need to be realistic and why in the movie as scripted "Paul emerges strangely victorious" (Badiou 2003: 39). It might thus be said that re-actualizing a seemingly outdated position, notably that of a religious militant, can indicate the forgotten, concealed impossible possibility of a subjective position for which there is no place within the contemporary world. Maybe it would already be enough to not even repeat the gesture of a religious militant, but simply depict the world as it is, following Brecht's model. But here the surplus generated by repetition is a surplus that relates to a specific kind of remembering: a remembrance of a seemingly inexistent possibility of a choice, even in times when there does not seem to be any, when nothing grandiosely new, nothing of any universal collective value seems to be happening – and sometimes the first step in such direction is to take seriously that there is none (cf. Ruda 2016). Hence Pasolini's never-shot movie sought to recall something that cannot but appear impossible from a contemporary perspective. So, what Pasolini's planned act of cinematographic repetition aimed at is to recall the very impossible-possibility of a subjective stance which opposes the given laws of the contemporary world. The implication of this idea is that for Pasolini any subject emerges from of an exception (for Paul obviously this is the Damascus experience). A subject in this sense is what emerges when there is a practical working on and through, a creation of a previously unforeseen and hence previously impossible possibility. This is why we are here not solely dealing with an act of remembering something that could be linked to objective knowledge. Rather the envisaged movie was supposed to remind the spectator of something that he or she never knew and hence of something that is impossible to remember. For Pasolini, it is essential to remember the impossible (to remember).

Cinematic Education

We are here dealing with an impossible insight, with an impossible that enters into sight. One would have witnessed in Pasolini's movie something, namely the creation of the real disposition from within – from within the immanence of an emerging subject. Pasolini's



movie sought to depict what one can usually only witness from within, from within the immanence of truth. To repeat Paul and his struggle with the world as it is, and to depict the world from the perspective of Paul, through showing his very struggle with it. This does not only imply the affirmation of an exception, but also that one, as spectator, experiences the unfolding of something that is deemed impossible – an unchanging commitment. From an impossible perspective – we become part of Paul's point of view onto our present world –, we witness the impossible happening, an event that changes one's life and the world and what follows from it (Paul's position). This is only possible because of the very functioning of illusion. Hence one is here dealing with an anamnestic effect, reminding the spectator of the impossible possibility of a real conviction of a subject that had been produced by an event (Paul's Damascus experience) and it allows us to see our world through the eyes of Paul: an impossible in-sight.

In the previously discussed models of Kant and Brecht we also encountered an educational or pedagogical element. Kant's point was that education works through illusion, Brecht's point was it can work through repetition. What if Pasolini's movie-plan unravels something about cinema's educational capacities, about what it can do pedagogically (although it, of course, does not need to do it all the time)? What if cinema could produce impossible reminders, reminders of the impossible, an anamnesis of something that exceeds knowledge? What if it can depict from an immanent perspective what otherwise we can only witness by becoming a subject? If this were the case, movies could remind their viewer of the impossible possibility of having a choice – not all the time, but sometimes; depicting the constitution of a new choice, when something happens that forces us to take a stance. And what if movies actually would depict the unfolding of such a procedure from within. To give a concrete example: if there were a good movie about love, it would make us witness from within the immanence of a collective love practice the act of falling in love, all the troubles and problems this creates, and the creation of what otherwise appears impossible, namely a sexual relationship.⁵ If cinema were to be endowed with the capacity to show us the transformation of the impossible into a new possibility, with all its internal complications, from within, cinema could de facto have an educational element as part of its constitution. It can be considered educational because it can make us see something that otherwise appears impossible by providing an impossible in-sight, by establishing a minimal difference that seemed inexistent before. Thereby cinema enables an insight into the not-all of the world as it is. What we get is a reminder, a kind of anamnesis of an

⁵ "Cinema is the only one of the arts that can claim to capture, pin down, and convey the sex act" (Badiou 2013c: 154). Along these very lines one should also read the following statement: "You can film a miracle in cinema, and it may even be the case that cinema is the only art that has the potential to be miraculous" (Badiou 2013b: 214). Why love generates what otherwise does not exist, cf. Alain Badiou's supplement to Lacan famous psychoanalytic adage that there is no relationship between the sexes (as the male and female position is so different that there is no neutral way of accessing their relationship). Cf. Badiou 2008. [This is ref. Alain Badiou, "What is Love?", in: *Conditions* (London/New York 2008), 179-198.]



impossible possibility. But why does this produce educational effects subjectively? Here we can return to Kant's argument. In cinema it is clear one is dealing with an illusion. Cinema is fictitious and in Kant's sense deals with permissible illusions. But even though we know that what we see are just illusions, they can nonetheless generate the effect Kant described, namely that we start to believe in them. So, if there is within the illusion something which is not of objective epistemological nature – recalling an impossible possibility – we may, although we know it is just an illusion, start to believe in it. Cinema can have an educational capacity because it can generate something real, a real disposition through its use of illusions. The real then generated is the belief that an exception is possible. We thereby believe in the impossible. As soon as we start to believe in the illusion and within the illusion there appears a minimal difference, we have the impossible in-sight and may fictitiously experience not what it means to become a subject, but that the impossible (becoming a subject) may happen.

Maybe from this perspective it is not entirely astonishing that after certain movies one feels, what appears to come close to what Kant once described as the feeling of enthusiasm.⁶ One can recall here: enthusiasm is defined in Kant as “a straining of our forces by ideas that impart to the mind a momentum” (1979: 153) and as sublime, that is as a moment in which “the senses no longer see anything before them, while yet the unmistakable and indelible idea of morality remains” (1979: 151). Enthusiasm is an interpenetration of idea and affect – and if cinema were able to instil it in us, it would make us see not something else, but in a different way (which is why it is no longer seeing with and for the senses). It is no surprise that Kant recalls this definition when he talks about the spectators of the French revolution and attributes to them “a wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm [...]” (1979: 151). If there is an educational power of the movies the enthusiasm they may create can be read as a form of slightly mad, wishful participation, as proto-subjectivization, in which one starts to truly believe in an illusion (and they certainly bring about all kinds of identificatory processes). Making us see differently, estranging even what seem most unalienable in the world as we know it, recalling the possibility of the impossible that ultimate may prepare us for becoming a subject – even though there is no guarantee. Badiou once contended that cinema is a school for everyone. One can add: a school wherein we learn impossible lessons, lessons of the impossible.

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⁶ Badiou also links the affect of enthusiasm to the movies without elaborating it further (cf. 2013a: 46).



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